



Doing Business in “English-speaking” Countries

by Anne Dean, Editorial Director, Living Abroad LLC

There are vast differences in culture between Americans and their British Commonwealth counterparts throughout the world.

American English is spoken in the USA, Canada and many Pacific Rim countries. British English is spoken throughout the British Commonwealth of 54 countries, most notable the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, with Canada being the exception. Although part of the Commonwealth, Canadians speak a mixture of American and British English due to their proximity to the USA.

But culture, not only language, is largely behind our behavior on the job. Often without our realization, culture influences how close we stand, how loud we speak, how we deal with conflict or even how we participate in a meeting. In our current global business environment, it is imperative that our managers understand people who come from countries whose culture is different from our own.

We tend to overlook the similarities and notice just differences when beginning to interrelate with foreign nationals. It is when we draw on the same interpretation that we would use in our own culture to the behavior of someone in the unfamiliar culture, erroneous conclusions will undoubtedly arise.

Actually, our own cultural characteristics are not apparent to us until we begin to interact with others from different backgrounds.

Cultures are also always changing, as they interact with others. For example, in the Far East businesspeople have cultivated a firm handshake to become more westernized, and now bow ever so slightly. While many cultural models influence a manager's behavior and reactions, five predominant ones are hierarchy and status, groups vs. individual orientation, time consciousness, communication and conflict resolution. By failing to understand how culture impacts needs and preferences, managers often misinterpret behaviors. A perfect example is someone from the Balkans (southern Europe comprising Albania, Northern Greece, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, and European Turkey), where the moving of a head up and down means “no” and not “yes,” as it does in most other cultures.

By briefly examining business etiquette and protocol in just the major English-speaking countries, it becomes apparent that the successful intercultural manager needs to investigate and assimilate the nuances of a country and culture, as well.

For comparison's sake let's look at the United States, Canada, England, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Nigeria, to point out some similarities, and more importantly, differences in doing business in “English speaking” countries.

Competition in American business may be unequalled to elsewhere in the world. Most American businesses strive for tangible results, which depends on the determination of individual employees. Individualism is not, however, the focal point of most US businesses. A sense of goal-oriented unity is usually a strong characteristic of businesses in the US.

One cannot emphasize enough the importance of timeliness in American business, hence an American saying, "Time is of the essence," which roughly means that time and timeliness are all-important, and encompasses all activity, such as arriving to work, completing projects and arriving at meetings on time.

Another way that the American work ethic might differ is anyone who wishes to succeed in the American workplace should take their schedules and deadlines very seriously. In the US, lack of timeliness is associated with a lack of respect for your employer and business associates.

Since time is such a concern for American businesspeople, it is very important in the business world to get to the point. Lengthy pleasantries and non-business conversations are not welcome within the business forum, particularly at meetings. Americans favor small talk to be kept to a minimum.

Any foreign nationals relocating to Canada are advised to consider the following customs and business etiquette which are found in most regions of the country. In general, all employees are expected to conduct themselves in the typical westernized business manner.

Generally, staff members are involved on all levels through meetings and consultations with their colleagues. While there are no special rules in conducting of meetings, they tend to be efficient and effective in achieving the next steps in a project. Staff members will defer to the senior person in attendance, but members are encouraged to voice their opinion and become involved in the decision-making process.

The English value the individualist; that is, someone who develops their unique identity within their group, within certain parameters. The British are sometimes seen as real sticklers for doing things by the book. No matter who. No matter what. You can be sure foreigners may be confounded by requirements that seem to be applied to all, yet seeing, clear evidence that many are exempt from those same rules.

The English believe in the value of organizing one's time carefully. Business and life are conducted best when done so in an orderly, progressive way. This leads to all sorts of uniquely British phenomena, from what some might term obsessive queuing at most any given opportunity, to the reliance on business agendas, memoranda, follow ups and the observance of schedules and timetables.

English is the primary language of Australia, however, you may encounter some difficulties in understanding the day-to-day language of your colleagues while in the country. The Australians use many colorful expressions and slang words in their conversations. Based on the accent, context and tone used, a word or phrase can mean several different things.

Australians are astute and have a no-nonsense approach to business. This often complements their direct mannerisms. They are fun-loving, informal and straightforward to the point of bluntness. The Australian lack of formality takes them quickly to a first-name basis.

New Zealand's business atmosphere is more formal than its neighbor, Australia. A firm handshake - the standard greeting - and smile are sure to make a positive impression. Punctuality should be adhered to at all times.

Most initial meetings are somewhat formal at first, until a more comfortable and relaxed atmosphere is introduced. You will find that your New Zealand counterparts will be rather impressed and appreciative at any attempt to understand their culture.

Although many different social customs between African and developed countries exist, you will find that most of the African population conform to western or international business customs. Of course, there are some slight discrepancies. Allow some time to get better acquainted and to gain the confidence of the local people. Expect some delays in business transactions, but be patient and understanding. If you are negotiating a deal, it is a good idea to bargain softly. South Africans are typically turned off by hard-nose bargaining. Leave them and yourself a lot of room to maneuver. A forceful attitude is generally not welcomed and will not produce the friendly business relationship preferred by most South Africans.

Lastly, Nigerians are very direct people, and this may prove to be an excellent asset for any business venture. They are tough negotiators and tend to be openly critical. Doing business with Nigerians takes time, patience and persistence with a touch of grace.

All negotiations should be with the highest ranking businessperson. Show interest in their world and progress. Conduct business on a personal level. That is, avoid conducting business over the telephone or your computer.

Most importantly, because of their Muslim practices, do not to give or accept anything with your left hand, and never point the soles of your shoe to another person.

As you can see, the role of an intercultural manager, or, simply trying to do business abroad is not as easy as one might think. Just because there are so many countries that share the English language, there are vast differences in their culture!